

# Ethical stance for research on sustainable tourism



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## **Introduction**

Dr Jim Macbeth (2005, p. 963), a lecturer and researcher in Australia who specialises in tourism research, has put forward the argument that, in the modern world, the stakeholders involved with the tourism industry, primarily the educators, developers and providers, need to find an “ethical” stance that will create a natural and appropriate platform for studying sustainability in tourism. To assess the validity of this assessment, one has to first consider the way that tourism research has been conducted and evolved in recent decades, together with the approach that has been used by the tourism industry in dealing with and combining the ethical and sustainability issues. From this a discussion on the relevance of ethical issues that are needed to address sustainability can be developed.

## **Tourism Research**

As Dr Macbeth (2005) observes, historically, tourism research had evolved into a multi-faceted approach, which is based upon the four main threads outlined in the study conducted by Jafa Jafari (1990). In the initial stages, such research concentrated mainly upon the economic aspects of the tourism process. Being directed in this manner, the result of this research tended to emphasise the fiscal benefits that developing tourism would bring to a particular destination and the commercial organisations. However, with the increasing prevalence of the implementation of the economic research and their impact on destinations, researchers began to ask questions about the adverse social and cultural effect tourism was having. These two processes covered the tourism industry through the era of growth in mass-tourism.

### **Alternative Tourism**

The third stage of tourism industry research development moved to the study of a new tourism phenomenon, alternative tourism. Initially, this was just seen and studied as a different level of tourist consumer, one whose demands and expectations were more than just the for the sun, sea and sand vocation of the mass-market vacation. These are the tourist who want independent and self-fulfilling vacations, ones that provided a unique level of escape. They were seeking the more active vacations, ones that gave the feeling of “ self-autonomy and self-invention” (Cohen and Taylor, 1992, p. 25)

It was as a result of this movement that the educational institutions, particularly universities, became more interested in treating tourism as a bona-fide study subject. Universities increasingly offered courses aimed specifically at tourism as they took a deeper interest in the subject. Jafa Jafari (1990) was also correct in his prediction that the global educational commitment to tourism has increased at a faster rate from the date of his publication than it did previously. In addition, the educationalists, scholars and researchers have expanded the areas of their research into other and dedicated aspects of the subject.

### **Sustainability**

In the last two decades two areas of tourism have attracted particular attention in educational and research, these being sustainability and ethics, in that order. Sustainability, which has been a driving focus in business for several decades, was the first area that caught the interest of tourism researchers. Initially it was approached on the basis of how to protect and

maintain the attraction of destinations that were experiencing mass tourism growth. However, with the advent of increasing concerns regarding protection of the historical and natural environment, together with the increased interest in the physical damage that man was causing the climate, the scope of research into sustainability in tourism broadened significantly. Studies were conducted into ways in which destinations of historical and cultural interest could be exploited for tourism purposes, and to the economic benefit of the local community, whilst at the same time ensuring that the sites remained intact and did not become damaged or adversely affected by the increasing tourist traffic influx.

Sustainability in natural destinations also received a lot of attention. The question of how one managed the dichotomy of conflicting issue that arise between the expectation and perception of the tourist consumer on the one hand, and the sustainability requirements of the destination on the other, were issues that resulted in a number of studies. For example, as Dr Macbeth (2005) has observed in terms of “wildlife” tourism, one has to decide how far to provide the natural experience of wildlife adventure that the tourists demands, whilst at the same time allowing the wildlife the ability to be sustained in their own environment. The discussion as to whether limited captivity, as is the case of the safari parks of Africa, provided a sustainable answer, namely would it still provide the experience that the tourist consumer required although not strictly a natural experience, was undertaken. One study into this specific subject by Newsome, Hughes and Macbeth (2005) showed that captive wildlife, seen in a natural setting, received a positive response from the tourists, fulfilling their expectations,

whilst at the same time this environment offered some protection for the animals and their habitat. Similar issues and concerns have arisen regarding the tourist attraction to natural places of outstanding beauty, such as lakes and mountains. Here again, studies have concentrated on the complex issue of how to satisfy the tourism need without allowing that need to destroy the environment being enjoyed.

However, problems began to develop when the theories were put into practice. As Fennell (2006, p. 1) mentions in his book, a “*negative backlash that has come about regarding the so-called ‘new tourism.’*” One of the main reasons for this was that not all of the stakeholders involved in the tourism research were being adequately considered. As Fennell (2006, p. 4) explains, there are three significant human sides to this triangle, being the tourist, the organisation that arranges the travel or vacation, and those who reside at or close to the destination. As a result of these mounting concerns, the issue of “ethics” began to arise.

### **Ethics**

Ethics are codes that are derived and constructed from the moral value that is attached to an action, and they apply to every aspect of our lives. In other words the fundamental ethos of ethics dictates that the action or behaviour of a person, group or organisation should be appropriate to the issue and be seen to be conforming to the expectations of those affected by that behaviour (Fennell 2006, p. 57).

Like the word “sustainability”, the term “ethics” has in recent years become a featured part of the rhetoric within the business world as a whole

and the tourism industry is no exception (Pearce, Moscardo and Ross 1977, p. 89). Much is written in promotional material by tourism organisations about the ethics of their product and the ethical principals by which they work. In fact a plethora of ethical codes have been produced for all tourism industry stakeholders including, “ *codes of ethics for travellers; codes of ethics for tourists, for government, and for tourism businesses. Codes for all...* ” (Fennell, 2006 p. 241). However, partially as a result of the fact that such codes were not considered to be sufficient, and did not respond to the issues that were being raised, tourism researchers such as Jim Macbeth (2005) and others began to study how ethics should be viewed and used when dealing with the problems of sustainability within tourism. To do this meant that one had to look at ethics from the point of view of all shareholders, which, when addressing the three mentioned in Fennell’s (2006, p. 4) study, meant understanding the effects that tourism policy and planning had on them. In addition there is the ethics related to the impact vacations will have upon environmental issues and how to handle these facets.

In term of the application of ethics to the tourist consumer, research has to consider both aspects of these stakeholders. Not only is there the moral and ethical issue of ensuring that the tourist perceptions and expectations are honestly matched, but there is also the tourists own ethical standards and how they impact upon the success of otherwise of the sale of the destination product. The authenticity of the wildlife issue has been mentioned previously. Although, the majority of tourists considered the “ captivity in natural surroundings” to be a natural wildlife experience, is it ethical for the

destination to be portrayed in this manner? Similarly, is it ethical for the wildlife to be subjected to this sort of unnatural control simply to satisfy the needs of the tourist consumer?

The tourist attitudes to “ alternative tourism” have also changed. The tourist consumer has become more aware of the environmental issues surrounding destinations and vacations. As Pearce, Moscardo and Ross (1997, p. 152) explain in their study regarding the tourist relationship with the destination they are visiting, the “ *environmental attitudes to tourism are not held in isolation but, for some citizens, are a part of a larger environmental ethic.*”

An increasing number of tourists no longer expect their vacations to include all of the environmentally damaging aspects that were previously provided, neither do they expect the planners and policy makers to develop areas for vacations to the detriment of the environment; historical and cultural values. Similarly, they do expect those same persons and organisations to act towards the tourist consumer in an ethical manner. The perception is that, whilst providing the destination for vacation, this should be conducted in an ethical manner, ensuring that the correct measures are taken to ensure sustainability of the site and those communities, wildlife and natural resources that depend upon it.

### **Brokers**

Brokers include all of those parties that have an interest in providing the destination and its activities to the tourist. This includes the local governments and policy makers, those who develop and maintain the sites, such as the hoteliers and attraction owners, and the sellers, being travel

agents. All of these organisations need to address ethical issues that attract to the services and facilities they provide.

Research has shown that many of these operators and brokers are already promoting the ethical aspect of their service, and are claiming that they have taken on board the demands of the consumer. For example there are corporations whose “ *Ethical tours claim to combine environmental education with minimal travel comfort, help protect local communities and environments* ” (Mowforth and Munt 2003, p. 51). However, research and studies undertaken cast doubt on many of these claims. As Mowforth and Munt’s (2003, p. 202) studies show, whilst the terms “ environment,” “ sustainability” and may appear in the organisation’s publicity to promote their ethical stance, it does not necessarily mean that these are factual claim. One representative, when questioned by these researchers in regards to their corporate responsibility to inform their consumers about the affect of tourism, responded that their primary task was to sell vacations.

Much of the research work that Dr Macbeth (2005) has undertaken over the years, has been specifically targeted at endeavouring to create a platform which allows these organisations to address the ethical issues that face them in the provision of destinations and services, so that the claims made can be supported by genuine action. Macbeth has provided both theoretical and practical examples of how a destination can be designed in such a way that it incorporates the needs of all the stakeholders, whilst at the same time limiting the damage that can be caused by unethical methods. This includes how to involve the communities at all levels of the development of the destination and its running; ensure safety of the local environment, historical

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venues and places of interest; and at the same time presenting the destination in an ethically positive manner that will still address all of the tourist consumer demands and expectations and sustain tourism usage.

One of the most difficult ethical issues facing tourism today is the community that live around or are involved in the destination site. This is especially true in areas such as developing countries and where there is a new destination being developed or exploited, as well as areas that have not had previous experience of such ventures within their locality.

In the case of communities in and surrounding new destination developments, there are a number of ethical issues to be addressed. For example, whilst most may desire the benefit of such a development, Dr Macbeth believes that the developer has an ethical duty to ensure that the community is fully aware of the impact that the developed destination will have on their lives, environment and, potentially, their culture. It is accepted that this is not an easy task to achieve, particularly as with no previous experience by which to make a comparison, these communities may not fully comprehend the impact even when it is explained to them. Nevertheless, as the case studies and actual projects carried out by Dr Macbeth and his students have demonstrated, it is possible for such an understanding to be achieved (Jim Macbeth 1997).

Community reactions are very important to the successful development of any destination site. Therefore their involvement with and acceptance of the project is important to achieve. As Pearce, Moscardo and Ross (1997, p. 6) confirm, “ *the issue of how communities shape and respond to social and*

*environmental changes is a driving factor in assessing community response to tourism. ”*

### **Environment**

Finally, there is the issue of ethics in respect of the environment. In the current climate of potential threat to wildlife, dwindling natural resources, locations and the larger environmental issues, destination managers have an ethical duty to play their part in its sustainability. They also have a duty to ensure that their development does as little environmental damage as possible and contribute to the protection of the environment, rather than add destructive forces that will increase the dangers and damage.

This includes such matters as energy conservation, emission control, and protection of wildlife, heritage and local communities. For example, with wildlife it is important that the planners are aware of any endangered species located within the destination target area, and ensure that the neither the development, nor the resultant tourist consumer activity can in any way add to the endangerment of that species.

### **Ethical research**

It is important that, prior to the commencement of any development, research is undertaken to ensure that all of the ethical issues are addressed. The organisation needs to understand the impact that construction projects might have on the local environment, and its impact on issues such as wildlife protection and climate emissions. The research must also evaluate the effect of the development on the local population, its culture and heritage. One important proviso of the research that is undertaken is the

independence of the researchers who undertake the study. Whilst, as is increasingly the case with studies and research projects that take place within universities, the planners and policy makers may contribute funding for the project, it is essential, and ethically correct to ensure that these people and organisations are able to carry out their tasks without any influence or pressure applied by those organisations.

The purpose of such research is to reach a conclusion that provides for an ethical stance that all of the stakeholders can agree is desirable and, in addition, provide recommendations as to how the project and the ethical stance can be achieved and protected. In essence it should form the basis for “ *the purpose of identifying a template from which to aid in the development of tourism ethics.* ” (Fennell, p. 197)

### **Conclusion**

From the various researches that have been studied in the preparation of this paper, it is the author’s opinion that the hypothesis statement made by Dr Jim Macbeth is supported. There is a need for the educators and other stakeholders in the tourism industry to review the issues and construct an “ ethical stance” that provides for a sustainable platform. It is equally importance that the strategy evolved from such a stance is seen to be effective and transparent to all concerned, with a determined effort to address and maintain all of the issues that constructing and maintaining a vacation destination involves. It is equally important to ensure that any studies and researches undertaken in an effort to achieve such a position are arrived at as a result of full discussion with, and involvement by all of the stakeholders involved with the product.

Fennell (2006, p. 346) observes, “ In allowing ethics into tourism, we open the door to philosophy and the humanities.” Whilst it is accepted that this is the case, in the view of the author, there is no possibility of omitting this factor from the tourism research process. Ethics is an integral part of the tourist consumer’s human decision process. It is the stance that is taken on those ethics and the way it is approached that is important.

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